

*Judah Goldin
and the Study of Rabbinics*

Proceedings of a Symposium in Memory of
Professor Judah Goldin

Professor Jeffrey Tigay (*University of Pennsylvania*)
"Judah Goldin, 1914-1998"

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"The Teaching and Study of Tannaitic Midrash According to Judah Goldin"

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The Teaching and Study of Tannaitic Midrash According to Judah Goldin

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'Asei torathka qeva' ("Make your study of Torah a fixed practice"), I recall Judah Goldin frequently quoting from Pirque Abot (1:15). And so he did. Every Wednesday afternoon for many years, while teaching at the University of Pennsylvania and before that at Yale, he conducted his Midrash Seminar. Although the corpus of rabbinic midrashic texts is vast and variegated, Judah usually chose to spend an entire academic year focusing on some aggadic (narrative) section of the tannaitic midrashim, thought to incorporate the teachings of the tannaim, or Palestinian rabbinic sages of the first two centuries CE. He did so not for lack of interest or fluency in the legal sections of these tannaitic midrashim or in the larger aggadic corpus of the later midrashim, but for his evident love of tannaitic aggadah as incorporated in the Mekilta, the Sifra, and the Sifre. In this, as in so many ways, he charted his own course, one that was to prove well ahead of its time. Generally, those scholars drawn to the tannaitic midrashim (also known as *midreshei halakhah*) have been interested in the history and hermeneutics of early rabbinic law, or halakhah. Those scholars more interested in aggadah have been generally drawn to the later homiletical midrashim, where aggadic traditions are more fully and elaborately developed and where the formal gems of midrashic literary creativity (e.g., the *mashal* and the *petihta*) are more amply displayed, but in looser relation to the scriptural sequence of verses.

Why, then, did Judah prefer to introduce generations of students to midrash by way of the aggadic sections of our earliest midrashic collections? I think the answer is twofold: (1) The tannaitic midrashim are organized as commentaries, in the simple sense of lemma by lemma explications of Scripture, which never depart too long or too far from the scriptural text upon which they comment and to whose details they closely attend. It is not coincidental, I believe, that Judah's own extended writings take the form of translations of and close commentaries to early rabbinic texts, whether Pirque Avot in *The Living Talmud* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955) as part of the Yale Judaica Series, and the Mekhila's Shirta, in *The Song at the Sea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971), the last of which he subtitles: "Being a Commentary on a Commentary in Two Parts." (2) The tannaitic midrashim derive from a transitional time, relatively soon after the destruction of the Second Temple and the failed Bar Kokhba revolt, when new forms of Judaism were emerging in response to the canonization of Scripture, the loss of the

Temple and its sacrificial worship, and the need for sharper self-definition in the face of the continuing cultural challenge of hellenization, the increasing political challenge of Roman hegemony, and the emerging religious challenge of nascent Christianity. These two aspects of the tannaitic midrashim are inter-related: commentary as a medium for self-understanding in relation to sacred scriptures and history.

To understand Judah's love of and approach to aggadic midrash as commentary, it is best to begin not with his publications, as rich and important as they are, but to return to his weekly Midrash Seminar.

What was Judah's pedagogic method there? In short, to force students to grapple first hand with the text in all its aspects. Judah did not belong to any school of midrashic scholarship nor did he wish to found one. For him the midrashic text points in too many directions to be bridled by any single methodology or theory of interpretation, or any simple explanation of its structures and history. Judah was himself too much of a polymath to be so constrained or to do so to his students. He wanted to follow a text's cues in as many directions as possible without pretending to have emptied its meanings or exhausted its possibilities. Hence, his choice of commentary as both subject and mode of study.

In commenting on Pirque Avot (1:6), *'asei lekha rav uqenei lekha haver* ("Provide yourself with a teacher, and get yourself a companion"), the Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan attends to the singular form of "teacher" as follows (and I quote, of course, from Judah's translation):

Provide yourself with a teacher: how so? This teaches that one should provide himself with a single teacher and study with him Scripture and Mishnah † Midrash, Halakha, and Agada. Then the interpretation which the teacher neglected to tell him in the study of Scripture he will eventually tell him in the study of Mishnah; the interpretation which he neglected to tell him in the study of Mishnah he will eventually tell him in the study of Midrash; the interpretation which he neglected to tell him in the study of Midrash he will eventually tell him in the study of Halakha; the interpretation which he neglected to tell him in the study of Halakha he will eventually tell him in the study of Agada. Thus the man remains in one place and is filled with good and blessing" (*The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan*, p. 49)

By quoting this passage I do not mean to suggest that Judah required his students to study only with him; quite to the contrary, he insisted that they study

other languages, other literatures, other histories with other professors whose approaches differed from his own. But his insistence on the study of a *single text* was predicated on a similar premise: the study of a single text could lead seemingly anywhere and everywhere, if only approached with the right tools, a sharp intellect, and a *lot* of patience. Commentary was the medium for the detailed disclosing of a text's plenitude of meanings. The fact that a tannaitic midrash was aggadic did not mean that its interpretation would not lead to matters of halakhah, or linguistics, or history, or classical literature, or to other literatures, contexts, and times for illumination. Just as early midrashic commentary is eclectic in its methods and themes, so was Judah's teaching and study of it. After I had taken Judah's Midrash Seminar two years in a row and showed up for a third, he took me aside and advised me that I had learned all I could from his seminar and that I would be better served taking something else instead. This was, I believe, the only time I ignored his advice, and for good reason. Judah's Midrash Seminar was not simply about studying midrash, it was a gateway to studying Hebrew, and the Bible, and Judaism, and Jewish history, and much more. But most of all, it was for me a way to learn how to study and teach texts from a master of the art.

Commentary, especially that of the tannaitic midrashim, can be very slow-moving, the impatient would say, plodding. But Judah delighted in moving slowly through its study and demanded, with relish, the same of his students. (I recall once standing with Judah on route to the Midrash Seminar in a crowded Van Pelt Library elevator which wasn't moving. While everyone else was growing restless, he leaned over to me and said: "This is an exercise in patience"; he could have said the same of his seminar). Although he moved forward with the midrashic text, he had no particular destination and had no particular timetable to which to adhere. If a particular biblical phrase and its midrashic commentary required a full two-hour session to grasp, and then only partly, so be it. It was more important to him to plumb in detail its depths and to explore the breadth of its textual interconnections.

Judah especially delighted in close attention to these textual interconnections. In one seminar, he had us transcribe "parallel" versions of a text side by side, thereby enabling us to better recognize the fine points of comparison and contrast between them. He did this not because he had fallen prey to "parallelomania" (he had little interest in determining which text came first or which had influenced the other), but to view each text, when so set against the others, in the sharper reliefs of its particular linguistic and rhetorical contours. Judah once wrote me (letter of November 23, 1986), quoting George Steiner quoting

Blake, that the study of midrash (and perhaps any text) required an appreciation of "the holiness of the minute particular." In another letter (November 19, 1991) he wrote: "Nothing like direct encounter with text, lemma by lemma, continues to hold my attention for it reveals dramatically the character of the trees inside the forest." Judah feared less the proverbial missing of the forest for the trees, than the loosing sight and appreciation of each tree (and branch and leaf thereof) in its own right.

In the Midrash Seminar, students would take turns, reading the Hebrew of the midrash, translating it into English (translation, Judah fully appreciated, is the first step in interpretation), and then explaining its meaning. When the student would think he was done, Judah would demand more: Now put into your own simple words what the Midrash is saying! How did it get from the biblical word to the midrashic explication? And just as a seemingly clear biblical expression could lead to a multiplicity of midrashic meanings, Judah's demand for commentary to the commentary would teach that a seemingly simple midrashic explanation could be investigated along a variety of paths. In effect: Don't be so sure that you understand the text! If not yet satisfied that we had adequately explored the midrashic exegesis, he would go around the table, asking each student in turn to explain the very same midrashic text, until he felt we had gone as far as we could in making sense of it, before moving on. In short, if the proof of the midrashic pudding is in its eating, Judah demanded of his midrash students a lot of textual chewing.

Part of Judah's way of jolting his students, especially the more traditionally learned ones, out of complacency with their self-confident understandings of the text was through humorous and often irreverent analogies to contemporary situations and experiences, in effect, modern-day mashals. That is, at the same time he was teaching us to problematize the text he was teaching us to become more familiar, even intimate with it. Through his own language of intimacy (the text was populated with "Jolly Jakeies" and the class with "my dears"; even as he called everyone by Mr. or Miss), he taught students to embrace the text in its details and ambiguities. In short, he taught us, by modeling for us, the pleasure of the text and its study. A great part of that pleasure for him, which he hoped to convey to us, was the lyric beauty of the Hebrew of the tannaitic midrashim. Both its concision and its repetitiveness needed to be savored, rather than erased through paraphrase and digest. In dwelling on the texts themselves, he sought for us not simply to understand the profundity of their meanings, but to be enchanted with him by the poetry of their expression. What Judah said of S. Y. Agnon, could be said of Judah equally:

But it is not only content that attracts him. The way the table is set is as important as the food. The patterns of presentation are not to be detached or erased from the passages quoted. Form is not immaterial or an afterthought.... they [the midrashic teachers] like the taste of quotation. He [Agnon/Goldin] does, too, with relish. ("Introduction," *Present at Sinai: The Giving of the Law, Commentaries selected by S.Y. Agnon*, trans. Michael Swirsky [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1994], xvii.)

Judah would come to class with his well-marked copy of the rabbinic text, a Hebrew Bible, and blue exam booklets filled with his finely scribed notes. But he never lectured from those notes. Rather, he drew from them as demanded by the discussion. He desired less to convey to his students what *he* thought the text meant than to goad *them* to grapple with the text until they made some reasonable sense of it. While he would suggest further reading on a topic suggested, if only obliquely, by the midrashic text, he only rarely referred students to his own writings. Several times I discovered only later that Judah had written an article on something we had discussed at length in class. This was less the consequence of his modesty than of his pedagogy: he wanted to teach his students to think critically and midrashically for themselves. I recall that one year he decided, as an experiment, that he would teach the Midrash Seminar without any notes at all, so as to free himself to encounter, with his students, the unexpected in the text.

Judah would say (please excuse the irreverence): "You can say anything you want about the rabbis, except that they were jackasses": meaning, you must take them seriously on their own terms. No matter how playful or fanciful their interpretations might appear, there is nothing arbitrary or capricious about them. In particular, Judah took very seriously the midrashic self-presentation as interpretation. The biblical verses were not simply hermeneutical hooks upon which rabbinic teachings were conveniently hung, for the sake of mere preservation or transmission. Rather, the interrelation between the biblical text and its interpretation was an expression of the ongoing cultural dialogue between Scripture and its sages. But in so asserting, Judah did not fall prey to the converse assumption that the midrashic interpretations were generated, as if inevitably, by the biblical text alone, sealed from the historical and human contexts in which the early rabbis and their students lived (and, Judah would add, loved). Midrash sought as much to explain the details of an ancient text as to render that text immediate to the present-time of its audience. This inse-

erable three-fold relationship (*hahut ha-meshulash*, to borrow Ecclesiastes's [4:12] phrase), between biblical text, interpretation, and life, is summed up in the title of one of Judah's essays on midrash: "From Text to Interpretation and From Experience to the Interpreted Text." It is this threefold midrashic cord that Judah sought to teach, both orally and in print. As much as he forced students to attend to the detailed, "local knowledge" of the particular midrashic text in its own attentive relation to Scripture, he demanded that they see the text in the broader cultural and historical contexts of its interpretive communities. Although he insisted on beginning with, and lingering over, a particular lemma and its midrashic commentary in all its immediacy, the rabbinic text (like the biblical text in the hands of the midrashist) was for him a touchstone to a much larger labyrinth of textual and associative interconnections.

There was yet another way in which Judah's attention to the midrashic text at its most local level did not preclude a larger view, that being of the greater scriptural context, the broader midrashic commentary, and their interrelation. In his midrashic magnum opus, *The Song at the Sea*, he delighted in demonstrating that the overall poetics and thematics of the biblical Shirat ha-Yam had "infected" the midrashic Shirta. "It is responsive to the mood and melodiousness of the original text" (23). At points where the Shirta might appear "far-fetched" in its interpretation of a specific scriptural lemma, the midrashic comment is simply giving expression to broader tropes of the biblical song. Thus, scripture sheds light on the meaning of its commentary as much as the reverse. To understand and appreciate midrash, as Judah did, you must first know well and experience deeply the Bible.

There can be no question that the recent surge in scholarly and lay interest in rabbinic midrash, and a newfound appreciation for the aggadah of the tannaitic midrashim, owe a great debt to the scholarship and teaching of Judah. How many students of varying backgrounds and levels passed through his Midrash Seminar and how many of those went on to teach midrash to others? How many received their first exposure to rabbinic literature, and to midrash in particular, through his graceful translations, probing commentaries, and clear essays? I for one still conduct a Midrash Seminar on Wednesday afternoons, often on one of the Tannaitic midrashim, beginning my own preparations with notes taken over twenty years ago in Judah's Midrash Seminar at Penn. If I am able to convey to my students a mere fraction of the learning and pleasure I acquired from Judah Goldin as my teacher and companion in midrash, his memory will indeed be for a blessing.